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FOLIA LITERARIA

The monk of the Middle Ages had one delightful quality that endears him to us—he was a book lover of a type now vanished from the earth. Not in the least a bibliophile in our modern sense, he knew nought of first editions, nor of Elzevir and Caxton; not in the least a specialist, he exhausted no little plot of literature with his gleanings; not in the least a collector of many books, he was well content with the twenty at his bed's head, or with the hundred in his cloister library. But in a reverence that often rises to whole-souled and enthusiastic worship, he finds no fellow among us. In a day when human life was cheaply reckoned, the living word was cherished far beyond, not only our estimate but our ken. "Take thou a book into thine hands," murmurs with bowed head one of these monks now unknown, "as Simon the first took the Child Jesus into his arms to carry him and kiss." Another, not unknown, the great Thomas à Kempis himself declares that "a priest without books is like a horse without a bridle, a boat without oars, a bird without wings." The very scribe bends devoutly to his task, and having reached his *Finis*, fingers to implore the reader not to fail in perfect courtesy to the work of his hands: "To a writer the last line is as sweet as port to a sailor. Three fingers hold the pen, but the whole body toils." And what a labor of love it was, lavishing itself upon graceful scroll and dainty flower, gorgeous capital and clear upright minuscule! This singer of the *Nibelungen Lied* attains to his superlative in likening the splendid beauty of his hero Siegfried to that of an illuminated letter in a manuscript. When work of scribe and binder was done, gold and silver and precious stones were brought to the book as noble offerings to the sheltering boards that enclosed so much wisdom.

Deeply imbued with this high reverence is the *Philobiblion* of old Richard de Bury. How solemnly the worthy bishop bows his heart at the shrine of good books! "We are not only rendering service to God in preparing new volumes, but also exercising an office of sacred piety, when we treat books care-

fully and again when we restore them to their proper places and commend them to inviolable custody ; that they may rejoice in purity while we have them in our hands and rest securely when they are put back in their repositories." And then the grave style kindles and glows, as the prelate thunders anathema against irreverent readers : against the lazy youth marring pages by his bookmarks, or by the droppings of fruit and cheese and wine ; against the drowsy head napping over the manuscript and wrinkling the fine vellum in his slumber ; against the varlet smelling of May, who stuffs the precious volumes with violets and primrose, roses and quatrefoil ; against the sacrilege done to the lily leaves by crying child, smutty scullion, and grease-stained fingers of sweaty layman ; above all against the careless hand that casts the book aside, to gather dust on its open leaves. He cites, quite in Isaak Walton's manner, a sacred precedent, dear to mediæval bookmen : "When Jesus had read the Book of Isaiah, he rolled it up with reverence and returned it to the minister."

Such loving reverence as this founded the libraries of cloister and college, and filled them with eager workers. As we read the quaint words of Bury and other bookmen, the busy scene comes before us : the mediæval book-room with its huge presses, its high desks and oaken seats, its black-beamed ceiling, its gently undulating floors—such a room as that at Merton College or at Winborne Minster—and it is easy to fancy the monks or clerks bending over the chained folios by the light that falls through the long diamond-paned windows. "In that cloister," says Bede of Jarrow, "I found it sweet to learn or to teach or to write." Fancy goes farther and follows the lives of the books themselves. Such a vivid sense of personality have many noble volumes that authors or scribes often give them proud tongues. "King Alfred translated every word of me into English and sent me to his scribes South and North," declares the Old English version of the great Gregory's "Pastoral Care." "Me thus established that holy and just bookman, Aldhelm, a noble *scop* who was bishop in Britain. I am a book of weight, so I tell the true word and never a lie," vaunts the Cambridge text of that Book of Noble Dames, *De Laudibus Virginum*. In the

great Exeter Codex, the sacred Book chants the wonderful story of its life through all the stages of preparing the parchment, shaping and trimming the leaves, inscribing the contents, binding and adorning the now revered volume, and sending it forth for the happiness of men and the glory of God. Here is this noble poem in my faithful, if rough translation :

Formerly a foe | of vital force bereft me,
 Wrenched away my world-strength ; | wet me quickly after,
 Dipped me deep in water, | dragged me forth anon ;
 Set me in the sunshine, | where I shortly lost
 All hairs that I had. | Hard and fierce the knife-edge
 Cut me through and through, | cleansed of every blemish.
 Me deft fingers folded ; | and the wild fowl's feather
 Sprinkled me with spume, | left its spoor across me,
 Bounding o'er the horn's rim, | bearing forth the black dye;
 With its inky stream | stepping on me proudly
 Swart of track it swept me. | Swathed me then in covers
 Prompt of help a hero | with hard hide enclosed me,
 Girded me with gold ; | then the gleeful workman
 Wrapped me well around | with the woven wires.
 Now may rich adornments | and the rubrics bright
 And my wondrous holdings | carry wide the fame
 Of high heaven's Lord, | not of hell the torments.
 So, if brains of earth | will to use my blessings,
 They will be the sounder, | and the more successful,
 In their hearts the higher, | happier in their thoughts ;
 They will have wise spirits, | and a wealth of friends,
 Ever sweet and social, | ever sure and good,
 Ever true and tried, | who their gains will treble
 And their glory bruit | by all gracious means,
 Who, with loyal love | and with long embraces,
 Hold them in heart's grapple.

Well might such books celebrate their glories, for their careers are often far more romantic than ever the adventurous lives of earls and thanes that sailed and loved and fought when these volumes were in the making ! The warriors died by push of pike, and helmet and sword are rust and dust ; but the gold of the illuminations is as bright and the broad script as clear as when the scribe labored lovingly over them a thousand years ago. Perhaps the most enthralling of all the stories told of famous English books is the tale of the wanderings of the *Lindisfarne Gospels* by land and sea. What viking of its day can rival it ? From various quarters we piece

together the narrative and learn how Bishop Eadfrith wrought the book seven hundred years after the Christ-birth, how Bilfrith the anchorite adorned it with gold and gems, how Eadwulf bore it away on a perilous journey, to escape the ravaging Danes, how his henchman, Hundred, lost it in the sea, and recovered it miraculously by Saint Cuthbert's timely aid. Old Simeon of Durham tells that part of the story: "The Northumbrians found that the sea had retreated much further than usual; and, going out three miles or more, they discovered the Book of the Holy Gospels, which had lost none of the external brilliancy of its gems and gold, nor any of the internal beauty of the illuminations and the fairness of its leaves, but appeared as if it had been wholly untouched by water. By this were their hearts refreshed with much joy." You can see the salty stains of some voyage on its vellum yet in the manuscript room of the British Museum. The famous quarto of the *Beowulf* has stood another test, that of fire, and has come forth from the burning of the Cotton Library with its edges scorched by flame, and some of its story sadly marred. Another adventurous volume of early poetry crossed the Alps either with Anglo-Saxon pilgrims on their way to Rome or in the collection of the distinguished Cardinal Guala, and has rested for many centuries at Vercelli. That ancient volume whose very title is a mystery, "The Red Booke of Darbye," fills the credulous reader in the twilight of the Corpus Christi library at Cambridge with an uncanny interest, by the dim legend on its fly-leaf: "This book was sumtime held in such reverence in Darbyeshire that it was commonlie believed that whosoever should sweare untrulie upon this booke should run mad." In the magnificent monument at St. Saviour's Church just across London Bridge in Southwark, the sculptured head of the "Moral Gower" had rested for five hundred years on three marble books representing his work in English, Latin, and French, before his lost French poem of thirty thousand verses was found in a private library in the North.

There is yet another English volume, less beautiful than the *Lindisfarne Gospels*, less valuable perhaps than the *Beowulf*, but in name and fame yielding to none, the venerable Codex in the Chapter Library of Exeter Cathedral. It is older than the

great Church of the West that guards it so carefully, older indeed than the see of Exeter itself. It was a half-century—some say a century—old, when Leofric, who had moved the see from Crediton to Exeter, made his famous donations to the Cathedral. All the things that he gave—vestments, chalices, candlesticks, bells, banners, and many books—have vanished in the mists of the yester-year, or have found their way into other hands, except this splendid folio, called in the bequest, “One great English book on various topics composed in verse.” For thirty generations Exeter priests have cherished it faithfully, save during one unguarded moment—who knows how long ago?—when one of its keepers, more careless than the rest, dropped a bit of burning wood upon the sacred page, and the life of the Book nearly went out in smoke and flame. The volume bears the scar of this adventure—a deep gash that has robbed us of some delightful verses. But this is the only mark of the centuries.

The visitor who has come so far to see and study the ancient leaves, is led into the august presence of the Book by the gracious Chancellor. For many moments he stands in charmed wonder. This is the Yarrow of his Bookland—and in the joy of the visit, he can find no words. The retreating footsteps of his guide and the metallic clang of closing doors do not arouse him from his reverie; time and space have fallen away, and he hears the roll of the ages. Of what wonders is this Book not a part: the founding of the Norman Church itself, the rearing of the mighty transeptal towers that stretch forth giant hands to heaven, the growth of nave and choirs under the hands of inspired Bishop-builders, the decoration of the Lady Chapel, so long its own dwelling-place? What dangers has it not survived: the forces of Stephen battering against the doors, the ruthless decrees of Henry turning monks adrift, the defacements of the days of Edward VI, the axes and hammers of Puritans, hacking pillars, hewing down cloisters, shattering windows? It has seen a great church robbed of early splendors and crumbled by decay, regain, through gracious restoration, its exquisite harmony. “For eight hundred years,” in Ruskin’s fine words, “the cathedral has lifted from the midst of a populous city grey

cliffs of lofty stone into the midst of sailing birds and silent air." The Book is well worthy of its noble home, for, like all the Old English manuscripts and unlike the Old French, it has about it the air of libraries and learning, of wealth and dignity.

The Codex now lies open revealing its treasures. Its first pages are full of the story of the Christ, and we hear even through the rough alliterative verse the sweet and solemn chanting of antiphons of Advent, the triumphant Ascension hymns, and the dread trumpet-call to Judgment. Now we read the tale of the fierce struggle between the Fiend and St. Guthlac in the English fens at Crowland; or we learn of the wonders of the Happy Land,—an early Avalon or Cockayne,—in which the Phoenix dwells far from misty, windy England. Then the Book leaves monkish themes and becomes Germanic to the core, indeed almost heathen, as it repeats the lament of the poor wanderer over the loss of his lord and of the old happy days in the mead-hall, sings the song of the sea-wearied sailor, tossing on a wintry ocean, mourns with the woman cruelly banished to the wildwood, or sadder still, pictures an ancient city fallen into decay. These are pure elegies; but the gnomic and didactic note, never long absent when an Englishman is making verses, creeps into the Book, and the gifts and moods and fates of men fill several pages. Now a handful of proverbs, now a fragment of bestiary or unnatural history, now the world-old dispute of Body and Soul, give to the volume a large variety.

But this visitor's interest is centered in the later pages of the Book, and in the hundred little poems that reveal every phase of Old English life from the highest to the lowest. These smack not of the cloister but of court and cottage, of the simple ways of the countryside, of the lore of little things that mean to us all far more than wars and the fate of monarchs. And, as the reader lingers over these delightful leaves, he is aware of their vivid sense of perception which seems to belong to a child-like world where all impressions are new and all things are first turned to the uses of man. The dew is on the flower, and the bird is timidly tuning its notes, before bursting into full voice. In this glorious young world there is nothing mean or base, because custom does not lie like a weight upon the tiniest de-

tails of life. Every man sees clearly, since he deems each thing worthy of his sight and of his telling. To match this naïveté, we should have to turn to Homer.

The faint echoes of the choral music, which affected young Pendennis so deeply in this very church of Exeter, penetrate the library corner. The light of the long English afternoon falls upon the Book; and the student bends his head lower, for here, under the edges of the vellum that clumsily seeks to repair the evil wrought by the burning wood, peer out furtively letters that no man has read or recorded for many hundred years. Now and then, in the gold-light, these letters form themselves into words, and the long-lost sense of the passage is restored. At such rare moments as these, the manuscript-reader feels a double joy; the delight of discovery that all investigators know; and the quickened consciousness of an intimate companionship with the past that he loves. Thus he finds himself exalted to such mediæval reverence for the noble Codex that he murmurs the petition of a worthy Old English scribe: "I beseech each man, prince or ward of kingdom, who may take in his hands and read this book, that, with all the power abiding in him, he shall promote the winsome craft of the writer."

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